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Activism and Social Movements in South-East Asia

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South-East Asia has been characterized by rapid economic growth and enduring socio-political disruptions. After the Second World War, many independent movements in the region ended up in or were replaced by authoritarian regimes. Only in the past few decades, mass protests have led to the fall of some of these authoritarian regimes, including the Philippines and Indonesia. Social movements and collective activism have played a crucial role in these upheavals. The region has seen an emergence of various forms of collective action and social activism ranging from small-scale mobilization to mass movements concerned with social justice, political and democratic freedom, gender, minorities, and the environment as well as civic, ethnic, indigenous, and human rights.

The history of social movements is deeply connected with the struggle for social change. Forming a heterogeneous compound of collective actors with a variety of demands and strategies, social movements essentially represent the “conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means” (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, p. 3). As a complex system of relations and networks, social movements transcend local, regional, and national borders and connect very different actors on various levels (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). The heterogeneous groups and networks demonstrate manifold processes of emergence, formation, organization, and transformation, which render any analysis of internal and external dynamics a significant challenge to the researcher.

In the past, research on collective action and social activism was mainly focused on issues of labor, class, and the nation, referring mainly to Marxist and structural-functionalist traditions (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). In South-East Asia, this overlap of the working class movement and emerging nationalism became obvious, for example, with the strong independent movements in Burma/Myanmar, French Indochina,

Indonesia (with the third largest Communist Party outside of the Soviet Union and China), or the Philippines (Anderson, 1998, pp. 7-8). The emergence of the so called “new social movements”, which mobilized actors across class boundaries, including women, students, ethnic minorities, migrants, or peasants, prompted a quick and innovative response with regard to empirical and theoretical analysis and has led to the proliferation of a range of social movement theories (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). In this context, collective action and identity theory, for example, points to the social psychology of collective behavior (McCarthy & Zald, 2009, p. 193; cf. Calhoun, 1994; Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1995), while resource mobilization theory addresses the more deliberate and strategic behavior and rational choices of conscious actors, notably in the early work of Mayer Zald and Charles Tilly (Freeman, 1979; Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The political process theory focuses on the political and institutional environment in which social actors operate (McAdam 1982; Tilly, 1978) and the new social movement theory highlights the structural origins of social conflict (Melucci, 1989, 1996; Touraine, 1981). Each of these approaches gives some proliferate answers to questions with regard to the structural conditions and pre-requisites for the emergence of collective action, the cultural and symbolic production of meaning and identity, the role of political and economic regimes, and the availability or non-availability of organizational and individual resources. These theoretical advances open a broad space for innovative analytical frameworks for the study of social activism and protest originating in the global South – a site rarely regarded as the place of production of social movements theory (Boudreau, 2004). Indeed, existing discrepancies between the geographical and historical roots of social movements theory and social movement activity today have been increasingly addressed by scholars from both social studies and area studies (Ford, 2013; Foweraker, 1995).

Historically, social movements have emerged as counterpart to the state and have challenged more institutionalized forms of political representation. Consequently, media and research alike have fostered a perceived dichotomy between politicized social movements – often equated with civil society – and an institutionalized state. However, in the face of an increasing interpenetration between civil society and the institutional system (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; McAdam & Scott, 2005), questions with regard to both the concrete relation between social activists and other institutional actors, including the state, and the actual role of social move-

ments in social and political change become ever more pressing.

The contributions in this issue offer an insight into the heterogeneous struggles of social movements in South-East Asia and present case studies from Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. Ranging from labor, ethnic, and women's rights to cultural expression and struggles for democracy, the examinations, however, exceed national boundaries and show the transnational character of present-day social activism.

In the first article of the present issue on social movements in South-East Asia, William Noseworthy analyzes the emergence of the *Unified Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races* (FULRO) in today's Vietnam and Cambodia from a historical perspective. With emphasis on the biography of the FULRO leader Les Kosem and the examination of original FULRO documents, which have not been referred to in any English language analysis to date, the author challenges a dominant narrative in the region that – based on James Scott's famous book – echoes a highland-lowland-dichotomy in the emergence of social movements. In his study of a more recent movement among highland minorities, Micah Morton focuses on the construction of identity and sense of belonging among Akha minorities residing in the borderlands of Burma/Myanmar, China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Drawing on ethnographic research in the region, the author shows how certain Akha elites promote their specific concept of culture and cultural citizenship across national borders by creating space for what can be perceived as a transnational movement. In a third article related to mainland South-East Asia, James Buchanan presents an insight of the Red Shirts movement in Thailand, based on participatory observation, field notes, and the translation of Thai language sources, such as banners, signs, songs, and speeches, during the demonstrations in Bangkok in 2010. Like the case of FULRO, the Red Shirts movement is intrinsically connected to the political structures and cultural context in which it emerged, and yet, both studies show that the analysis of these structures may not be enough to explain the actual rise, formation, and eventual transformation of collective action into a social movement (see also Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2001).

In a similar manner, Kristina Großmann presents a more recent study on Muslim women activists in Aceh, Indonesia. Based on biographical interviews, the article highlights the subjective positioning within but also the reflective interpretation of the events after the tsunami in 2004. Muslim women activists in Aceh point at exist-

ing discrepancies between the aims of foreign donors in the region and those of local organizations, emphasizing a return to women's needs at the grassroots level. Offering a similar argument, Julia Scharinger examines some of the problematic aspects of participatory theater in Timor-Leste, which, placed in the hands of international donors and NGOs, was eventually transformed into a *tool* for development, losing its stimulating and emancipatory potential. The author clearly shows the existing tensions between the roots of participatory theater in a bottom-up social movement and the more institutionalized and top-down approach applied by NGOs and international donors.

In the study of social movements nowadays, global phenomena and local politics present two entities that cannot be separated from each other (Caouette, 2006; Caouette & Tadem, 2013; Smith, 2002). Steve Beers outlines some of the ways in which transnational labor activism affects labor organizing in Indonesia. By drawing upon the literature on discursive framing, the author shows "how local activists draw upon internationally circulation discourses of labor rights and adapt these discourses into the local political context". Also focusing on labor movements and unionism, Niklas Reese and Joefel Soco-Carreón challenge the idea of the eventual transformation of precarious working conditions into conscious behavior and collective action. Grounded in a comparative research project on the making of new social movements in South-East Asia, the authors attempt to explain the connection between precarity and (the lack of) collective action in Philippine call centers from a Foucauldian perspective.

In the final article of this issue, Oliver Pye and Longgena Ginting analyze the emerging resistance against a food and energy estate in West Papua, Indonesia, as an example for a new social movement that draws on different traditions of struggle. By analyzing the interests and strategies of local, national, and international actors engaged in the protests, the authors highlight three narratives of opposition that refer to indigenous rights to the forests, the Indonesian 'colonization' of Papua, and land reform.

Each of the articles in this issue deals with one or several specific aspects of social activism in South-East Asia. Although far from any attempt to cover the whole range or reflect the complexity of social movements and collective action in the region, they add knowledge to existing assumptions on the formation, or-

ganization (or institutionalization), characteristics, strategies, and eventual impact of social movements. In subsequent sections of this issue, Wolfram Schaffar and Ralph Guth address critical questions with regard to research and analysis of democratization processes along liberal constitutional ideas by focusing on the participation in and negotiation of political processes in Thailand based on three different movements. In dialogues with Kinari Webb and Phra Maha Narong Chaithatha, Bethany Kois and Carina Pichler respectively present inspiring insights in new forms of social activism deeply rooted in the social and cultural context of the region.

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